

# Seven Characters in Search of a Different Script

Feras S. Muhaidat\*

*"We are seven sisters, all of us frightened."*

Women in Fear (p.1)

Fear haunts the entire story of the Iraqi woman writer Inaam Kachachi. Throughout "Women in Fear," the writer stages fear as a diabolic source of persistent menace that nurtures the anxiety of the seven sisters' fragile souls. Each of them is plagued with hysteric awareness of the social implications of the present, literally or metaphorically, father-figure of which she psychologically suffers. Such subliminal experiences, whether domestic or public, contribute a lot to their ultimate, carnivalesque rebellion against the only "Adam" in their "trip of a lifetime." However, it seems that each character embodies a certain aspect of women's struggle with patriarchy except for the narrator, who encapsulates a wide spectrum of gender issues, like motherhood, working mothers, sexuality, workplace abuse, women's place in party politics, sexual harassment, etc. The story at large threads a necklace of different themes as much intersectional and varied as Muna's moral laxity and urban planning of Baghdad might be with a string of wretched individuality and confiscated being.

The male/female binarism that engulfs the entire narrative determines the focal point of interpretation. It unveils the attendant charm of the inner conflict within the burdened women with anguishing social injustices. Though the only present male character, the driver, is described endearly as their "partner," he is by all means the

---

\* PhD candidate at the University of Jordan\_ Amman / muhaidat.feras@gmail.com

patriarchal sacrifice at the altar of revenge to atone for all pain and suffering it has caused to all of them including Atika and Atifa, who loathe themselves for being different and, in a way, unappealing according to the cult of beauty standards due to their "dis-ease" and encroaching age respectively. For Ifaf, she already has a husband who blames her, day and night, for the failure of their marriage because, he thinks, she still thinks of her maiden boyfriend. Husam, her husband poses a constant threat to her mental and emotional stability she craves for. But Wisal's case is the second most complicated one after the narrator's because she alludes to an historical era of the Iraqi state when, presumably, Al-Ba'ath party is taking hold of everything even the interpersonal power comrades can assume accordingly over one another depending on their party rank. Politics and state structural hierarchies play a crucial role in stabilizing the disturbed gender condition in a typically oriental society where women have the lower hand in almost every respect. Maybe this explains Wisal's attempt to use the party and its discourse as a final resort from her boss's intrusions.

Manal and Muna are the young female voices in the narrative; they represent what might be irksome to the younger generation of the women under androcracy. Yet they do so in differential approaches; Muna is the one who defies the patriarchal code of decency by showing lewd acts and moral laxity towards the bus driver for which she anticipates short life as a dear cost of her repudiation. Meanwhile, Manal stands on the other extreme to line up with what patriarchy dictates her to do while waiting for her fiancé Nadir to come back from war, so the story sheds light on the married women's conditions during war time and how terrified they feel about the possibility of losing their male partners and guardians. It also indicates deeper awareness of their dependency on them whether emotionally or financially.

Throughout the story, the male figure is by and large peripheral and scarcely has a representational space of his own, always in the backdrop of the mainly psychological drama of the sisters. He is much like Joyce's perception of the modern God-like writer, manipulating his creatures' destiny the way he likes behind the scenes. However, this total control is knocked out in a ritualistic Rabelaisian maneuver at the hands of the angrily enthusiastic "amazonians." For them, the driver incarnates the patriarchal totem that they must mutilate to finally emerge triumphant from this eternal conflict of will to power. For the first time they feel collectively empowered to redeem themselves and find what they should be and choose to become. They set out on a "trip of a lifetime" for the boon as Joseph Campbell proposes in his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. This boon is their momentarily symbolic freedom even if it is performed hypnotically after a fit of extreme ecstasy over the appearance of Atika's removed cancerous breast.

The magical realism of the breast incident reinforces the story's postmodern outlook along with the intensive staging of the sisters' Kafkaesque mindscape and their numbness towards time; they no longer feel the progression of time. All days are the same especially for the narrator and obliquely the other sisters who appear anxious about their age still they are caught in the same vicious circle of the same ever-recurring worries, dreams, and aspirations which never come true; nothing new really happens. Unfortunately, this melodramatic finale of the story renders its sub-generic status problematized; it is not clear whether it should be read as a tragedy or a comedy of seven desperate characters in search of liberation. Despite the Shakespearean banquet atmosphere of the end, it is existentially tragic since they will soon realize that they are still under the spill of patriarchy. The ending resonates with K. Chopin's "A Pair of Silk Stockings" in which Mrs. Sommer has a very short great time on her

own which she wishes never to end, but afterwards she definitely returns to her subjugated miserable life. These women characters in both stories, and maybe beyond, are mere "cogwheels in the machine of history" as Jan Kott describes the tragic pattern in the Shakespearean historical plays. Indeed, such oscillation that the rise and fall of certain characters represent is just like the seismographic movement of transient peaks of freedom and longer level intervals of submission.

To cut the story short, the largely static pace of the narrative reflects the stagnation in the characters' dilemma of finding the elixir to their troubled lives not just giving vent to them. Actually, the stuffed ideas in the story need more space to be sufficiently developed, most of them are only mentioned for the sake of mentioning nothing more. It seems that the writer is strongly occupied by propagating feminist concerns even if it jeopardizes her narrative choices. For instance, her obvious zeal to represent the dismal reality of her characters in favorable light, she introduces the fantastic elements of the breast and the sea in Baghdad, adding the missing link of optimism. However, such incredibilities might be dismissed by some Arab readers as naive or rather sentimental.